

to be a Fae Queen
by Tricia Copeland

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Chapter

1

I GLANCE UP AT MY CRYSTALS AS the last rays of the setting sun cause splotches of amber to dot the stone walls and ceiling. It is my favorite, yet saddest, time of day. I dread and cherish my next task in equal measure and linger at the window to relish the last bit of sun on the meadow.

Forcing myself to turn from the scene, I raise my wings. Light from the window shines through them, causing the room to glow with a slight green tinge.

Crossing to my doors and opening them wide, I scan my ceiling to savor the dimming light illuminating my prisms. I close and open my wings, rising into the air and exiting my room. Flying through the castle to my parents' chambers, as I do every night, I alight in their study.

Mother sits in front of the fire, harp on her right, Father on her left. Seeing his chin dip, I approach Mother.

I kiss her cheek. "Mother, will you play for us, or shall I?"

She blinks, and I think I see the edges of her mouth turn up just a hair. Sitting on the hearth before her, I await a reply. *Had I imagined a slight smile, or was it wishful thinking?* Her gaze shifts to her lap.

"Perhaps you could play, Titania. Your mother loves hearing you." Father stands and wraps his hands around her shoulders.

Mother's eyes stay trained on the flames in front of her while I slide the stool to the harp and begin a tune. After years of lessons, I play well, but nothing like Mother used to. She could draw tears from a crowd with one pluck of a string. Father retakes his seat, and I note his

furrowed brow. Laying a hand across the strings, I halt my song.

“Father, is something wrong? Surely, Mother will...” I swallow before uttering the same hope-filled words I repeat every night. *She will be better when her mourning is over. One year per lost child seems appropriate.* Several years have passed since my four brothers were slaughtered while fighting the kobold army. Three years since we have heard her voice or gotten more than a blink of her eyes in response to kisses; hugs; condolences; pleas; and sometimes, on my part, tear-filled rage at her inability to see I not only lost my brothers but my mother as well.

I thought one of her sisters would stay after the official mourning period. I loved having my cousins here, but each of the aunts crumbled under the duress of Mother’s catatonic state. Father offered their husbands prominent positions in the army, but after the prior massacre, even the promise of wealth and admiration would not sway them to stay in our kingdom, and they sailed north, over the sea, to their home in Bedham. As much as I wanted to, I could not place blame. Each kingdom faced their share of foe, but none proved more dangerous than the kobold.

“Many thoughts weigh on my mind.” Father’s voice brings me out of my self-pity.

“Please, tell me.”

“Finish your tunes first. They bring me joy.”

Not knowing how else to help, I begin a new song.

He works hard touring the countryside with his guards, hearing grievances of our people, and keeping the accounts balanced for the kingdom. I worry he is lonely with only his advisors to converse with.

Once the ballad ends, I spin my stool to face him. Taking a deep breath, I wait for him to speak. He smooths his beard and begins the story of the kobold. How they live in caves and hollows between our realm and Lower Earth.

“Father, I know the histories. I am not a child anymore. Please, just tell me what troubles you.”

I guess that he may not wish to dwell on all we lost either, especially as we try to keep our nights together happy and carefree. With my brothers gone and my mother’s condition, he and I only have each other. His two brothers and their sons were killed in the battle as well, leaving us the last remaining royals of Aubren, me the only heir to the throne.

Seeing Father raise his hand to his beard brings me back to the worries at hand.

He spins a lock of the curly hair between his fingers. “You will be Queen one day. I guess I

cannot shield you forever. I just know the anxiety the memories cause you.”

Remembering the purple wings and gnarled claws of the beast that tried to kill me, my heart rate rises. “The kobold have returned?”

Staring at the flames, he rubs his hand down his pant leg. “Several anchor crystals that support our Faerie Ring have disappeared. We believe a mutant kobold took them. Soldiers found footprints near a cave in the wood on the eastern side of the kingdom.”

My heart thuds and mind reels with the implications of the missing crystals. The Faerie Rings create portals between our realm, known as Middle Earth, and Upper Earth. If the anchors cannot be replaced, the ring dies, the portal closes, and we will be cut off from all that is above: sun, rain, and winds to clear our air. With no light or water, our plants will die and our animals will starve, and with no access to Upper Earth, we will die with them.

“Mutant kobold? Why do you call them that? Do we not have multiples of the crystals? Why not replace them?”

“We found footprints in the wood, but the Ring Keeper was not alerted to the kobolds’ presence. Somehow, they stole the anchors without being detected. We believe either they have bred with a magickal being or were aided by magick. And yes, you are correct. There is one additional set of crystals set aside for each ring. But we cannot risk these being taken as well.”

“So, gather a group of soldiers to investigate. Surely the kobold did not just disappear.”

“I cannot send my fae into the caverns below. It is too dangerous. Too many evil beings lurk about. I have posted guards at the cave entrance where we saw the footprints. If they come again, we will be ready.”

My heart races, and sweat beads on my forehead. I sense the first warning signs of one of my episodes. I picture my crystals hanging from my ceiling and take a slow, deep breath.

Crystals. If there is anyone better at finding crystals than I, I doubt it.

“I am good at finding crystals. I could learn which we need and search the streams for new anchors. The water brings them down from the mountains.”

Father shakes his head. “It is too dangerous. I do not have enough warriors to guard you, guard the Faerie Ring, and watch for the kobold.”

“There are far too many fae for the kobold to overtake the whole realm. What do they hope to gain?”

Father paces to the hearth. “A foothold perhaps? They have attempted it before. It is not

unprecedented. Perhaps their numbers have grown too vast for the caves. They seem to be getting desperate. Either that, or there is a darker force at work here.”

“Do you really believe they have developed magickal abilities?”

A chime sounds from the clock on the mantle. My eyes cut to Mother, wondering if she registers our conversation, holds opinions, or even cares her daughter and her husband need her.

“I have kept you too long. You need your rest for your studies and training.” Father crosses to me. He leans over and kisses my forehead as he does every night, but his smile does not reach his eyes.

“I want to help. If there is anything I could do—”

“I have my generals and advisors. You need not worry.”

“Okay, goodnight, Father.” I wrap my arms around him and squeeze his shoulders.

Approaching Mother, I bend over and take her hand. “Goodnight, Mother. I love you.”

Her stare does not move from the fireplace. Still, I pull her to me and kiss her cheek.

Fighting the water pooling in my eyelids, I beat my wings and take to the air. I fly out the door, maneuvering through the halls to my room. I click my door shut and press my back to the soft wood. Heart pounding and breaths becoming jagged, I imagine the worst. *What if these kobold and their new magick steal all the anchors? What if they overcome our troops?* I slide to the floor and stare at my crystals, trying to control my breathing. The cool stone beneath me calms my nerves. *Father will figure this out. He always has in the past. We lost many in the last battle but were victorious in the end.*

Rising, I cross to my dressing table, brush my hair, and dress for bed. Carrying my candle to my bedside, I slip under the blankets. I pull them up tight around my neck and study my crystals overhead. The faerie crosses are not the most popular because they are mud brown. Some of them form diagonals, but I keep only the most perfect, right-angled versions. I polish each face so they reflect the light. The candlelight bounces off those above me. They protect their owner from bad luck and connect the spiritual planes. My brothers helped me start the collection and it helps me feel connected to them. Beginning my ritual of counting each crystal, I pray, as I do each night, to grow strong and wise enough to make Father proud. I shall be seventeen in just over a year and ready to take a position on Father’s council if they will have me. If not, I plan to find a way to prove myself.

I bite my lip as my pulse quickens. *How am I, an anxiety-ridden girl, to rule a nation? Do I*

even want to follow in Father's footsteps? Have the weight of a kingdom on my shoulders? Perhaps I should focus on searching for a distant relative, someone untouched by memories of past battles. There are more pressing issues, I admonish my thoughts. The Faerie Ring must be preserved. That should be my focus.

Sleep evades me as I toss over ideas for helping Father. Giving up, I slide from my covers and slip on a robe. I take to the air and weave through the halls to the library. There, I search for texts on the Faerie Ring. Arms loaded, I make my way back to my room, dropping the books on the bed. I read through each one, making notes on descriptions of the anchor crystals. Studying the texts until deep in the night, I fall asleep and dream of the stones, guards, and mutant kobold.



I WAKE TO THE SOUND OF BIRDS calling, not the normal chirps of morning but ominous tones of premonition. Sitting up, I note the time and wonder why my curtains are not open. No breakfast tray sits on my table. I have slept well past mealtime, nearly till mid-morning, yet little sunlight reaches through the slits in the drapes. Throwing off my covers, I race to each window and sweep the fabric back. Muted light greets me, and I peer out over the orchard, noting the dull green of the leaves and somber, grey sky. My breath catches in my lungs, and I bolt to the door. Flinging open one panel, I stop short.

Alfreda stands, one hand balancing my breakfast platter and the other over her heart.
“Blessed be! You scared the life out of me.”

“Has another crystal been taken from the Ring?”

“Well, good morning to you, too. But that is not for you to worry your pretty head about. Your father does not want to alarm you. He ordered me not to draw your curtains.”

“Did he think I would not notice? I am not a child. Were more crystals taken by the kobold?” I put my hands on my hips and glower at her, astonished they thought something like this could be kept from me.

“Nasty creatures.” She skirts around me to the table, setting the tray down. “Goodness, what is going on? Where did all these books come from?”

I flit to my bed and gather the texts. “I thought I could help Father by studying the crystals of the Faerie Ring.”

“Eat your breakfast. Your father ordered that you stay within the castle walls.”

“What about my walk in the wood with Mother?”

Alfreda cups her hand on my cheek. “I know your pleasures are few and far between. With the threat from the mutant kobold, your father’s fae are spread thin. He does not have enough soldiers to watch for the kobold *and* guard you.”

“I am not a child. I can take my bow.”

“Dear”—Alfreda shakes her head as she backs to the door—“do as you are told. Your father has enough worries without thinking of you being in harm’s way.”

Inhaling, I dig my fingers into my palms, hardening my resolve. I hate being coddled. I am fifteen, almost sixteen, not a youngling who needs to be protected. Slumping in my chair, I pull the breakfast tray to me. While I chew, I count my crystals. My eyes trace the pattern on the ceiling, starting with the outermost circle and following the concentric rings to the center. One thousand. A smile spreads across my face, and I release my breath. Saying a silent prayer to the goddesses, I snatch the last berry from my plate.

I slip on a top and some walking pants and take wing in the direction of Mother’s chambers. She sits in front of a mirror, a lady brushing the long strands. The handmaid hands me the brush, and I rake it through Mother’s soft locks. Muted rays from the window cause her straw-colored hair to glow.

“Your hair shines like the sun today, Mother. We will be walking in the garden and orchard instead of the wood. The apples are ripening, and we may find a tasty one.”

Studying our images in the mirror, I remember how she used to braid my hair and wind it atop my head. We look so different, and I think it odd how we contrast each other—her with blue eyes and light hair, and me with golden eyes and dark mahogany hair like Father’s. Thornton favored Father as well, but my brother kept his hair and beard so short it did not seem a prominent feature. Garrison’s and Bryce’s coloring matched hers. I picture their light beards in my mind and how Garrison doted on me, teaching me to hunt in the woods. Hair the color of strawberries graced Rigel’s head, and I almost laugh thinking of how our older brothers teased him. Seeing Mother’s stoic eyes in the glass, I refocus on the task.

I lift her arm, tucking it in mine, and lead her to the garden. My bare feet savor the feel of the smooth, cool pebbles, but the dim light above me causes me grief. The mutant kobold must be stopped. Still, I force myself to walk every trail with Mother and wind to the orchard. Mother’s arm twitches, and her torso shivers.

I wrap my arm around her back. “I will take you to your room. I do not want you to catch cold.”

Leaving her with a lady, I take wing back to the apple trees. No noise from the castle reaches the glen, and I land between the branches. Even with the threat of the kobold, I relish the soft grass under my feet. I hear a crackling sound behind me and jump into the air.

A limb rustles, and I project my voice. “Who is there?”

A soldier emerges from behind the branches. “Forgive me, Princess. I am Foster.”

“What are you doing here?”

“They sent me to watch over you.”

“Why are you not guarding the crystals or watching the caves for the kobold? And why were you hiding?”

His strawberry-blond lashes flutter as he blinks, and red-tinged bangs swish over his forehead as he shakes his head. “They sent me to guard you, but I was not to be seen.”

“Well, you have not done a very good job. Are you even old enough to be a soldier?” I try to ignore his large green eyes, squared chin, and muscled chest.

He broadens his shoulders, and his wings, white with umber streaks, spread out. “I am seventeen.”

“How long have you been in the army?”

“Three months.” He lowers his wings, and I note the gold-tinged edges, wondering if they shimmer in the sun.

I roll my eyes. “I guess that means they do not believe me to be in any real danger.” *If Father sent Foster with the hope I may be distracted by a handsome boy, Father will be disappointed.*

He holds up his bow. “I have this.”

Shaking my head, I spin away from him. “Throw it to me if you spot something dangerous. I never miss. Do not call me Princess or Your Highness. My name is Titania. And stay at the border between the garden and the orchard. I prefer to be alone.”

“But—”

Before he can utter another word, I charge him, snatching the bow from his hand and quiver from his back. I cock an arrow and release it. Some hundred feet away, it lands in the dead center of an apple, ripping it from its branch and projecting the fruit to the ground beyond.

When I meet his gaze, his spring-green eyes lock on mine. “Yes, Your High... Umm, Titania.”

He speeds away, and I secure the bow and quiver on my back. It is much bigger than mine, and the weight of the weapon feels odd, but I decide I like it. Adjusting the two shoulder straps, I realize they hold the bag in place better than my sling. I shall ask Alfreda to have someone fashion a similar pack for myself.

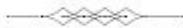
With the knowledge that Foster watches me, I cannot relax but still pace through each row, pondering how I may help Father. There seems to be little I can do from the confines of the castle walls. I circle back to the orchard’s exit, retrieve the fallen apple, and take a bite of its flesh.

“Here.” I toss the quiver and bow to Foster as I cross into the garden. “Thank you.”

Weaving through the bushes, I sense Foster trailing me. I pledge to ignore him and make my way to my first class, history. With Foster by the door and my worry for the Faerie Ring, it is hard to concentrate. The school master reprimands me but sends me along for my fencing and music lessons.

Foster’s presence feels smothering, and while it fuels me to swing my blade harder, the harp strings and our ears fare worse. Returning to my room to dress for the evening meal, I draw a bath. I catch sight of my bow in the corner and wonder if I may be of some use to Father as a soldier. Perhaps I could dress in their armor, and no one would be the wiser. Father retains hundreds of warriors. *What is one more archer? But you probably know the woods and stream better than anyone else.*

The evening passes, as most of them do, with dinner in the small hall with Alfreda and Father’s Army General, Kane, dining with us, and my session with Mother and Father.



WHEN MY EYES OPEN THE NEXT MORNING, I sense a chill, a darkness that pierces my bones, and my shoulders shudder. The air smells odd, as though full of dank, moist dirt. I scan my room. The curtains have been drawn back, and muted sunlight produces a slight glow. My tray of nuts, berries, and fruit sits next to my bed.

Shrugging off the unsettling feeling, I sit up and transfer the plate to my lap. As I place a berry in my mouth, I lift my eyes to the crystals. *One, two, three.* Halfway round the first ring, I freeze. *One is gone.* My breath catches. *This cannot be. Are others missing?* I continue tracing

around the circles. Two-thirds in, another is absent. When I get to the center, I spring up to the ceiling. My favorite crystal, the one Garrison and I found on the bank of the river when I was eleven, is gone.

Shooting to the exit, I throw open my doors and run smack into Foster. “How long have you been here?”

“I took over watch at sunrise.”

“Well, whoever guarded last night failed.” I cringe at the thought that one of those huge, dirty kobolds was in my room. “Three of my crystals are missing.”

I speed down the hall with Foster close behind. Swinging open the doors to my parents’ quarters, I find them seated at the breakfast table.

“Three of my crystals have been taken. Someone, *something* stole them in the night.”

Father drops his fork, and it clinks on his charger as he stands. “What?”

My eyes dart to Mother, hoping for some reaction to the scene. Her blank stare holds to her plate.

“Are you sure? I mean, you have a lot of crystals. I do not see how you would notice three missing.” Father bends to retrieve his napkin.

I zip to him, hating that he would question me and that I may have to admit to my odd routine in front of Foster. “The center one, the crystal I found with Garrison, is gone. Plus”—I cut my eyes to Foster—“I count them twice a day. A thousand. There were a thousand when I went to sleep last night. There are only nine hundred ninety-seven now. The center one and two others are missing. I could tell something was off the moment I woke up. The air smelled foul. It was one of those mutant kobold. I know it.”

Foster steps towards us. “A guard was at your door all night. I replaced him. Were your windows locked?”

My rage erupts anew. “Yes! I checked them. Perhaps the guard fell asleep.”

Father rubs his beard. “Did you see footprints? Anything out of place?”

I shake my head.

“I will have a team come to your room to investigate.”

The thought of huge guards rifling around my private sanctuary makes my stomach turn. “No. I will not have soldiers stomping through my room. I will figure out what happened to the crystals myself.”

I dart from my parents' chamber and race through the halls back to my room. Sweat beads form on my cold forehead, and my breathing becomes jagged. *A kobold entered my room, flew over my bed while I slept, and it took three of my crystals?* I lower my head to my knees and take in a slow, deep breath. Part of me knows it is juvenile to place such importance on stones, but Rigel and I found my first faerie cross when I was four. Collecting them with my brothers was what I did.

“Are you okay? How are you going to find the kobold who took your crystals?” Foster’s voice interrupts my internal struggle.

“What are you doing in here? Get out.”

Chasing him into the hall, I slam the doors. I circle my chamber, embarrassed that he witnessed the exchange with Mother and Father and my fit of anxiety. I continue circling my room, my breath evening out with each pass. After several rounds, my eyes land on my arrows. A plan forms in my mind, and I snatch my quiver and bow.

Bolting out of the doorway, I halt in front of Foster. “How many arrows can you get?”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you think you can amass hundreds?”

He shakes his head. “All the supplies are allocated to the warriors. The ammunition closets are empty.”

“We will have to ask Father then.”

I force my wings to beat as fast as they can, propelling me through the corridors to Father’s chamber. Not finding him there, I speed to the throne room. “I need arrows, lots of arrows.”

“What is this? What do you mean?” Father glances from me to Foster.

“You say no one saw a kobold, only footprints, that magick may be aiding them, making them invisible. I am the best archer in the land. I can launch arrows for hours without missing my mark. If I fly arrows across the cave opening, I will eventually hit something, even if it is cloaked.”

Father stands and paces. His eyes cut around the room to his advisors and back to me. “It may work. I will get my warriors on it.”

I meet his stare. “I am your best marksman. No one can beat my range, precision, or stamina. It is the best plan. You know that.”

“Titania, it is a good idea, and I commend you. But it is dangerous in the wood. You are to

stay in the castle.”

No matter what Alfreda or Foster say, I stew all day. *How can Father not let me help? I am more than capable of defending myself. And something, probably a kobold, took my crystals. It was not enough that they killed my brothers, now they are stealing my link to them as well.* I stare at my ceiling, counting my crystals. Tears roll down my cheeks as my gaze lands on the missing centerpiece of my design. That night, it takes a long time for sleep to come, but well past midnight, it does.



IN THE MORNING, I NOTE THE dimmed light from the sky and count my crystals again.

Making my way to the throne room, I approach Father. “Is there news? Did the warriors find a kobold?”

“I am guessing not. General Kane has not reported in yet, but I instructed him to alert me if they found anything.”

“And you positioned them so their arrows flew across the opening every ten seconds all night?”

“Well, I am not sure of the details, but I ordered that they attempt your strategy.”

A soldier enters and bows, and a hush falls over the room. “King Oberon. I have your morning update, sir. Additional anchors were stolen from the gem room, and the Keeper of the Ring reports that three toadstools from the Faerie Ring withered during the night.”

“And the archers were positioned at the cave as I asked?” Father inquires.

“Yes. They hit nothing.”

The silence begins to wane as whispers break out between those gathered.

Father stands. “Double your fae at the cave. Sound the alarm if you sense anything strange.”

“Father, I know the wood like the back of my hand, perhaps there is another—”

“Titania, that is all.” Father motions for the soldier to approach.

If I could shoot fire from my eyes at Father, I would. Tears pool on my lower lids. I rush from the room, zipping through the halls to the garden. Foster trails me, keeping his distance, as I enter the orchard. With heaving lungs, I descend to the grass, the coolness of the blades calming my mood. In the next breath, new fears erupt. *What if the circle dies, and we are cut off from*

Upper Earth? With no sunlight or water, our people will be left eating the creatures of the dirt. I examine the grass under my feet, imagining chewing an earthworm or centipede, and my stomach turns. *And who will guard the humans from the creatures of Lower Earth? Is that not our sole purpose?* My chest seizes.

“Do you really think you can find the kobold? Bring one down?” Foster’s voice breaks through my spiral.

Blocking out the image of the looming beast above me, I spin to face him. “You saw the crystals in my room. I found every one of them in the eastern woods. I know every hollow and thicket. Plus, I do not miss my mark, ever. No matter how long I shoot for. Where are you from?”

“Westshire.”

“May I?” When I hold out my hand, Foster places his bow and an arrow in my palm. I shake my head. “The whole quiver.”

He relinquishes the bag, and I fit it on my back. Traipsing to the last row of trees, I point to the end tree a hundred feet away. I cock an arrow and launch it, then another, and another, until all twelve shafts are away.

Foster squints. I motion to the tree, and we dart to it. Twelve arrows, each one an inch apart, form a line up the trunk.

“How are you so good at this?”

“I know not.” I shrug. “Skill borne of hours of boredom, I guess.”

“I know of your brothers. I am sorry for your loss.”

I do not want to feel sad. “Do they speak of my odd habits in Westshire as well? Or perhaps the guards poke fun at my peculiarities.”

Foster’s eyes widen. “No, never. No one should have to endure such loss.”

“I am sorry. I should not berate you. Your sentiment is kind. I am just frustrated. No one will ever take me seriously unless I can prove myself.”

Holding my gaze for a second, Foster scans the trees. “So, what would you do if allowed to aid in the hunt for the kobold?”

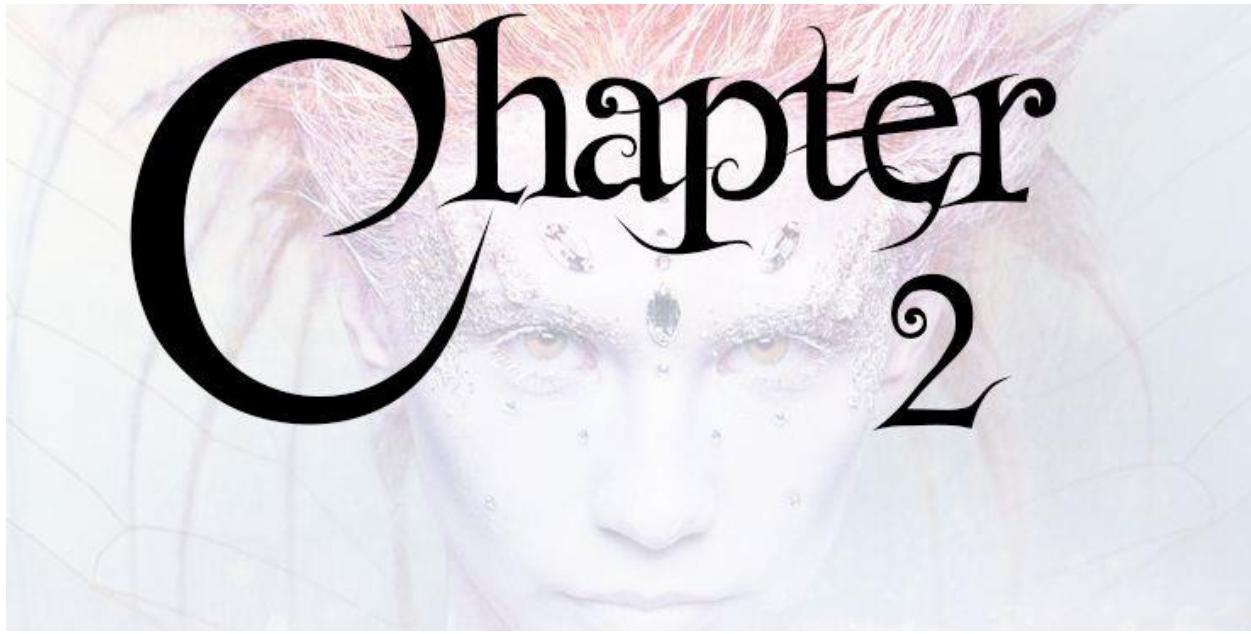
“Search the wood. Make sure there are no other openings for the kobold. Then, I will keep shooting arrows across the entrance to their hideout until I hit something.”

“How long can you keep it up?”

“Last time I started, Father made me stop after thirteen hours.”

“When was this?”

“Last week.” Face flaming, I direct my attention to the ground. Sometimes, when nothing else calms my nerves, shooting is the only thing that works. The repetitive motion and counting the shots helps ease my tension, frustration over my mother’s state, and worry for my future.



Chapter

2

THAT NIGHT, WHEN I FINISH PLAYING for Mother and Father, I suggest again that I may be of some help with tracking the kobold. Father repeats his order that I am to stay within the castle walls. Frustrated and angry, I dig my nails into my palms but nod in acquiescence. I take my leave and race back towards my room.

“Do you always fly so fast?” Foster asks as he trails me.

“Only when I am angry.”

“What is wrong?”

“Father will not let me leave the castle walls.”

His wide-eyed concern sends me over the edge.

I do not need his pity. I slam the door in his face. I rest my back against the wood and try to catch my breath.

There is a rap on the door. “Are you okay?”

An idea forms in my mind. If I am not watched, I could slip out my window unseen. “I am fine, Foster. It is dark. Go home. I am sure the night guard will be along soon.”

“Can I come in? Perhaps I can help you.”

“Why would you help me?” I do not have friends. Father keeps me sequestered in the castle most of the time—I guess for fear that I, too, will be taken from him. My emotions rage out of control from fear to over-confidence. I cannot continue to act this way. A princess should appear regal. I open the door. “Forgive me. It is late and I am tired.”

“It seems as though you could use someone to talk to.” His emerald eyes reflect the candlelight.

“Thank you, but I am fine.”

Reaching in a pocket, he hands me a whistle. “Let me know if you need anything.”

“Thank you. Goodnight.” I click the door closed.

My mind races with the events of the day. Frustrated, I begin to count my crystals. I count, skipping the missing pieces, and my anger rises. I take a deep breath and start to think of a way around Father’s orders. If seen outside the walls, I will be dragged back to the castle and watched around the clock.

Still, I can guard my own crystals at the very least. Dragging a pillow, blanket, textbook, and hourglass to the window, I start my vigil. My eyes grow heavy after an hour of reading. I jump up and fly around the room to rouse myself. Resting back on the sill, I count the crystals again to stay awake. Exhaustion still takes me.



I STARTLE AT THE SOUND OF Alfreda’s voice.

“What are you doing up there, child? Come down.” Alfreda motions to the floor.

“I am not a child. I was trying to keep watch. I guess I fell asleep. What time is it?”

“Seven. Time for breakfast.”

My eyes cut to the window. “Why is it still so dark?”

Alfreda wrings her hands and shifts weight between her feet. “I am sure everything will be fine. Your father will take care of it.”

“Alfreda, tell me now. That is an order.”

“More crystals were taken in the night. The ring is dying.”

I peer overhead, seeking solace from my crystals, only to find over half of them are gone. “My crystals! How did this happen? I lay on the windowsill all night.”

“Those horrid creatures.” Alfreda’s hand pops to her gaping mouth. “Just eat your breakfast. Foster is waiting to escort you on your walk. I will let your father know what happened.”

“Are you mad? Something needs to be done. I cannot just go for a walk like every other day. Our world is falling apart.”

“Titania”—Alfreda rubs her hands down my arms—“that is what your Father wants you to do. He and his generals are holding meetings now. They will think of something.”

“Fine, leave me.” I flit over to my breakfast.

Once she is gone, I dress and pull on my boots, planning to listen in as Father confers with his fae. At the door, I hesitate. My crystals call to me. *You cannot leave without counting your crystals*, the internal voice beckons. *No*. I retaliate against the thought. Garrison, Bryce, Thornton, and Rigel are gone, counting the crystals will not bring them back. I must think of some way to help my people.

As I open the door, Foster greets me. “Are we walking through the garden and orchard today?”

“No, we are spying.”

“I am under strict—”

I raise my palm. “I care not.”

Grabbing his arm, I drag him to the back of the castle and into my secret passageway. I press my ear to the stone abutting Father’s study.

“We are spread too thin. Perhaps we could work with the neighboring kingdoms.”

“The kobolds must be aided by someone.”

The pitch of the voices rise and fall. I hear it, sense it: fear, dread. Sweat forms on my forehead, and my heart begins to race. Recognizing the signs of an imminent anxiety episode, I take a deep breath.

I turn to Foster. “We should take that walk now.”

His forehead wrinkles. “You do not want to hear more?”

“No, I want to walk. *Now*.”

Before he can say anything else, I dash through the narrow tunnel. I weave through the hedge, the garden colors diluted as if they are sun-faded water paintings. Birds call from the tops of the trees in the orchard, and the eerie, half-lit scene leaves me more anxious about losing our opening to Upper Earth. I head back towards the castle after one pass of the outer circle.

“Perhaps we can practice fencing or archery,” Foster says.

“What of my studies?”

“Alfreda said none for today. All minds are focused on figuring out the how to save the ring.” He motions to the sky.

“Yes, of course.” I draw in a breath.

We pass the day fencing, shooting arrows, and playing games. I hate that I have been left out of the discussions. No one calls me for dinner, and Foster and I take supper in my room. Even this chamber, usually my favorite place, offers me no solace. As the last bit of light leaves the sky, he and I make a pact to spend the night on my windowsill, waiting for the kobold.



WE ARE AWAKENED BY ALFREDA’S screams the next morning. “What, dear children, do you think you are doing?”

I zip into the air. “We are not children. Foster is a soldier. We were waiting for the kobold. What time is it?”

“Seven, as always.” Her eyes land on Foster. “You should go to your quarters.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He bows and backs to door. “Your Highness.”

“I guess it is good you have a friend.” Alfreda’s eyes cut to the sky as she draws the curtain on the other window.

“Where is the sun?” I race to the opening.

“This is all, dear.”

“What happened?”

“Your father is going to the neighboring kingdoms to ask for assistance. He believes the kobold will target them next. They will aid us. You and Foster should pass the time together again today.”

“How can I do that when our kingdom is crumbling?”

Alfreda sighs. “Dear, please, just listen to your father.”

“Fine. Go, then. I will summon Foster later.” I grab my breakfast tray and plop onto my bed.

Looking at the ceiling, I realize only a few hundred of my crystals remain. My heart thuds in my chest. *This cannot be happening.* I grab my bow and quiver and jump to the window.

I blow into the whistle Foster gave me, and he appears within seconds. “What do you need?”

“We must do something.”

A smile spreads across his face and he bows low. “Whatever, you wish, High—”

Swinging my legs over the sill, I hop to the ground. “We need arrows. Lots of arrows.” He leads me to the ammunition stores, but the rooms are empty, and my mood plummets. Between us, there are only twenty-four arrows.

“The troops are sleeping after the long night. We may be able to sneak some away.” Foster tugs my sleeve, motioning for me to follow him.

We fly to the barracks where the troops lay resting and flit between their beds, swiping several arrows from each quiver, and soon, our arms are full. Making our way to the garden, we wind through the maze to the orchard. We jump into the air, flying high over the wall, over the farmers’ fields, and to the eastern side of the kingdom. Descending into the forest, I adjust my vision. A small group of warriors flank the cave. They shoot arrows across the entrance every minute or so.

I turn to Foster. “Something is not right. This is where they saw the footprints?”

“Yes, I believe so.”

“What if it is a diversion?” My mind spins, remembering several openings I knew along the banks of the river. “Come on.”

Following the stream, we inspect each hollow, but cannot find evidence of kobold in the forest. We head south, following the waterway to the ocean. A darkness, blacker than any night I can remember, descends, and we circle back to the castle. As with the prior night, Foster and I sleep on the windowsill, this time taking turns keeping watch. When my clock strikes seven, I sit up and inspect the grounds. No light glistens in the sky, not even on the edges.

Foster rouses, rubbing his eyes. “How are we going to find anything in this darkness?”

“We will need lanterns and fuel. But first, we must find out if there are any crystals left in the Faerie Ring or if the kobold have absconded with all of them. If there are not any left, I doubt they will return. They will probably move on to the next kingdom.”

Flitting from my window, we make for the home of the Keeper of the Ring. He is the oldest fae in Aubren and has watched over our Ring since the age of seventeen. I have seen him in the castle but only spoken to him a couple of times. *What will I tell him? Why would he give us information?* An idea forms in my mind.

As we land in front of his cottage, I whisper to Foster, “Let me speak with him.”

“I was hoping you would say that. The Keeper does not seem like one to be trifled with.”

I knock on the door, and a bent gentleman with long white hair and a beard greets me. His

thin, holey wings hang slack from his back, seeming as if they may crumble at any second.

Straightening my shoulders, I lift my chin. "King Oberon sent me to get a report. Are any functional anchors left in the ring?"

"That is very interesting, Princess Titania, because I just spoke with his First Advisor, Gunther, moments ago." The Keeper holds my stare.

I swallow and take a second to devise another strategy. "So, you know who I am. Good. Then you know how important it is that the royal family be apprised at all times. I am on a mission for my father."

"One anchor stands. You could pass to Upper Earth, but if we lose this one, you would be stuck with no way of return. Perhaps that is what your father intends? To safeguard his only daughter until he can secure the realm? I would allow this. His majesty must know that. Will your mother be accompanying you?"

"No, I mean, thank you, good day, and blessings." I back from the door, taking to the air.

"Do you think that is what your father means to do? Have you secured away?" Foster's words echo my fears.

"I know not. But I cannot let that happen."

"If your father wants you to go to Upper Earth, I do not see how you will avoid it."

"I will not go back to the castle then. You can get all the supplies and meet me at the bend in the stream." I land outside the castle wall.

We think of all we may need, including a map, lanterns, food, and additional arrows. Foster agrees to meet me in the wood and jumps into the air.

"What if I am seen and they ask where you are?" Foster hovers above me, ready to take his leave.

"Tell them I am napping, at the library, fencing, in the garden, or roaming the orchard. It does not matter, just be quick."

Pulling my wrap around my body, I start towards the forest. I think of Alfreda coming to my room to find me gone. *Perhaps I should have told Foster to make some excuse to her.* But our kingdom sits on the brink of disaster, we have not time for such things. When I enter the trees, the darkness envelops me, and I spring into the air. Enough light filters to the middle of the canopy for me to stay hidden yet avoid a run in with a branch. I find the stream and wind to our meeting spot.

I sit atop a stump to wait. I hate the dark, and every crackle and tick causes me to jump. Thinking of what may lay ahead, I say prayers to the gods and goddesses. An image of the kobold looming over me flits through my mind. I extend my hand and envision light springing from my fingers. Nothing. I close my eyes and focus on my core, picturing a ball of light emanating from my chest, spreading down my arm, and leaping from my hand. I lift my eyelids to blackness. *How are you, a fifteen-year-old, sheltered princess, going to make a difference?*

Standing, I slide my quiver from my back. I can but try to help. Doing something will be better than nothing.

I launch arrows into the soft bark of a tree opposite me. When my arms tire, I pace the small clearing wondering why Foster is not here yet. Was he detained or assigned another duty? What if he does not come at all? What shall I do then? Just as I decide to give up, I hear the rustling of wings overhead. I hide beneath a bush until I see his red hair.

“What took you so long?”

“The kitchen staff thought it sweet I wanted to pack a picnic to entertain you in the orchard. They felt the need to make sure the biscuits were warm and cream cold.”

“A picnic? They will think you are courting me.” I lift a bag of arrows from his shoulder.

“I thought it smart of me.”

We study the map, marking off areas already searched, then we take to the air, searching each hectare. By what would have been nightfall, we have only one corner of the kingdom to rule out: a small strip of land on the southern tip.

“The map says the earth slopes up to a volcanic cone. I cannot imagine there would be anywhere to hide there.” Foster pops a piece of bread in his mouth as we rest on a rock.

“Except a huge mountain with plenty of space for underground caves and tunnels?”

“The map does not indicate any caves in Mt. Kosciuszko. It is an active volcano, and it could erupt at any moment.”

“A perfect hiding place, I should say. One no fae would dare enter.”

After finishing our snack, we shoulder our packs and take flight, rising as the mountain does below us. The air cools, and I wish I wore my winter coat. We zigzag over the surface, making sure to survey each parcel. Higher up, no trees grow, and with thinning air, we land, hiking back and forth to the top. At the summit, I behold the countryside stretching to the next kingdom and watch the light from their rings fade with the sun above. I imagine what the view

may be when the full sun blesses the whole realm and wonder why I have never ventured to this spot before.

The ground beneath me shakes and, gripping a nearby rock, I steady myself. “What was that?”

Foster holds out his hand. “Something is not right. We have to go.”

“We have come this far. We are close. I know it.”

“If anything happens to you, I will be blamed.”

“You are my subject, and I ordered you to follow me.”

“You know that is not how your father will see it.”

“Then we must hurry.” I jump into the air and head down the mountainside.

Seeing a steep rock face and ledge hidden behind a row of trees, I land, Foster quick at my side. I hold the lantern up to visualize the space, and wind back to the cliff around the curve of the mountain. An opening, five feet wide and twenty feet high, looms in front of me, hidden from view of the valley by a copse of trees.

I raise my light and step inside. “What do you think?”

“It is worth inspection.” Lighting another lantern, Foster inches to me.

We tiptoe into the passageway, dodging rocks jutting out from the walls. We tread five, ten, twenty, fifty feet into the cavern. Bone-chilling air hits my face, and a rancid smell, the scent of a kobold—I will never forget that smell as long as I live—surrounds me. *How did I confuse the smell in my room with this one? It has been three years. Similar, yes. Both foul, but not the same. The one in my room smelled more of oil and musk rather than fermenting meat.* I tuck that thought away for later.

“This must be it.”

“It is definitely some type of passageway.” Foster lifts the lantern between us and kneels.

“Are these footprints?”

“If you can call them feet.” I recognize the claw marks of a kobold. “We should go back. We would be no match for one kobold, much less an army, and also whatever magick creature is aiding them.”

Jumping up into the air, we race back out of the opening and to the trees. I extinguish my lantern. “Do you think they will know we are here?”

Foster snuffs out his light. “We have no idea how long that tunnel is or if they will even

come out.”

“But it is worth trying. We searched every parcel. I feel it in my bones. This is where they are hiding. Give me an arrow.” I raise my bow.

Foster hooks his quiver on a branch. “Do you not think we should call for backup? These things are strong flyers. And they can be invisible. What other powers might they have? If something happens to you—”

I snatch an arrow from his bag. “What about my guilt if something happens to you? Did you ever think of that?”

“But I am a no one. Only my family cares if I come back.”

The mountain rumbles, and our tree shakes. I grip the trunk. “We are not going to have families to go back to if we do not find the kobold and the anchors. Do not sound an alarm until we see a kobold. That is an order. Father will just lug me back to the castle.”

I cock my bow and release the arrow, sending it speeding across the opening. I count to thirty and repeat—then again, and again. Foster flies to the other side, retrieving the arrows to keep them replenished. I pull my arm back and release repeatedly. Adrenaline shoots through my veins as I repeat the motion.

With the darkness, I lose track of time. Foster shakes my shoulders, breaking my concentration. “You have to eat something. Let me take over.”

After snacking, I resume my post but begin to doubt the kobold will come. The arrows make little sound, but perhaps the beasts have detected the motion. *Thirty*, I finish counting and let the next arrow fly, and the next—one after another.

“It is the witching hour,” Foster whispers.

“What? We have been here eight hours?”

“Yes, Your High... Titania.”

“Okay, focus. This could be the most important hour.” I study my target.

“They could figure out your system. Maybe you should just shoot them at random times.”

I bite my lip. “I do not think the kobold are that smart.”

“Maybe.” He shrugs. “Does not hurt to try.”

Shooting after ten seconds and then twenty, thirty, back to twenty, and ten again, I vary the time. After letting the tenth arrow loose, a screeching sound cuts through the night. My eyes dart to the opening, and I see a huge, lumbering kobold, holding his side where my arrow entered. I

cock the bow again and release, hitting another beast. Foster launches an arrow at the opening, hitting an at-first-invisible target that morphs into kobold. We fire arrow after arrow, and more kobold fall.

I nudge Foster. “I think we should sound an alarm. Call for the warriors.”

“Your father is not going to be happy with me.”

“The armies are far away, and we do not have many more arrows. If we miss, we are in trouble. Plus, we are the heroes here. The only thing my father is going to do is give you commendation and a promotion.”

“I pray you are right.” He puts the horn to his lips and blows the high-pitched signal only faeries can hear.

I refocus on the cave opening and launching arrows but do not hit any more kobold after shooting another ten. Not wanting to risk retrieving them, and with only four more between us, we halt our attack.

“What do you think? They gave up? Retreated back inside?” I whisper.

“Or are coming with a bigger army, different weapons, or going out another way?”

I peer into the darkness. “Where is Father’s army?”

“I think we wait.”

The moments drag, and cold envelopes my skin. Shivering, I rub my arms, trying to keep warm.

“Highness, huddle in my jacket.” Foster opens his coat.

My teeth chatter as I slide to his side. The heat from his chest warms me, and my muscles relax. I note his scent, like that of hay and fresh-cut grass. After a few minutes, the flapping of wings catches my attention. Slipping from his side, I stand on the branch to see Father and a legion of faeries descend. Jumping into the air to join him, I hold my breath, waiting for his reprimand.

“Titania, how are you here? Who sounded the signal?”

“We did.” I motion to Foster as he approaches.

“Foster, you were to—”

“Father, the kobold. We have found their entry point.” I point to the crevice in the rock and the fallen kobold.

Father directs his troops to give us additional arrows and leads his warriors into the cave.

Foster and I continue our assault on the cave entrance, hoping to stop any kobold that escape the army. Ten more kobold fall from hits with our arrows. I lower my weapon as four arrows land on the rock ledge.

“I think that is all of them.”

Foster squeezes my hand. “You saved us from the kobold.”

“*We* bested them.” I smile at him. Jumping into the air, I head to the opening. “Now to help Father.”

“I do not think he would want—”

“Whatever magick creature is aiding them could be hiding inside. The army needs all the soldiers it can get.”

Flying over the kobold corpses, I divert my eyes to the dark opening ahead. As we descend into the mountain, the passage grows dark, the air heavy and cold. A light in the distance grows brighter, and as we round a bend, I stop short. Soldiers hunch over a form.

I push through the rows of fae to the center. My father lies motionless on the dirt.

“What happened?” I kneel beside his body, running my hands over his legs, arms, and torso, searching for a wound. “Father, wake up!”

Removing his helmet, I test his neck for a pulse. I feel a slight erratic vibration under my fingers. His chest rises, and he coughs up blood. My mind reels. *I cannot lose my father.* Sensing the fae behind me, I stand.

“Where is the rest of the army?”

“Highness, come away.” One of the fae pulls me towards the exit.

I shake my head. “Did we find the anchors? Where are the other soldiers?”

General Kane steps forward. “The others are chasing the kobold farther into the cave, searching for the anchors.”

“Have four of your fae take the King back to the castle and call for the Healer. The rest of us should aid the army. We need all the soldiers we can get.” I hold my palm out to Foster, and he sets my bow in it.

Taking wing, we charge deeper into the tunnel, finding the others fighting hundreds of the kobold—half-sprite-half-reptilian-like creatures. I thought them bigger but realize most are not much taller than the male fae. Without my sword, I am no match for them in direct combat, so I cock my arrow, bring down one, and motion for the others to do the same. We pick off the ones

we can from the air while the warriors aid their comrades on the ground.

Scanning the cave, I see an orange glow at one end. I approach the opening and find it leads to a smaller cavern. With the kobold army locked in battle behind me, I slip inside. Huge chests litter the floor. Beyond, hot pools of lava bubble and fester. I drop to the ground and lift the lid of one of the chests.

Foster lands beside me.

“Guard the exit.”

He opens the box to my right. “I stay with you. We do not know what lies beyond those lava fields.”

“I would guess whatever evil being is aiding them.” I dart to the other crates, searching for the anchor crystals.

Opening yet another wooden box, I find it full of crystals, including some faerie crosses, and wonder if they are from my chambers. I drop one in my quiver and move to the next chest. Blinding white light sears my eyes.

“These have to be the anchors. Give me your bag.” I fill Foster’s pack and then mine, taking all the crystals. As we fit the quivers over our shoulders, the ground shakes. A fissure opens between us.

“What was that?” Foster offers his hand.

I fit mine in his as the lava bubbles higher. The rock rumbles beneath us. Red magma shoots from the cracks and splatters the cavern ceiling. A column of rock topples to the ground, and we jump into the air. Shooting for the exit, I yell for Foster to sound the retreat.

Foster blows into his horn as we pass into the large hollow. With a boom, rocks fall from the cave ceiling, blocking the entrance to the inner cavern behind us. One by one, our soldiers take to the air, leaving the remaining kobold wide-eyed. I hover near the ceiling as the passage grows tight with our warriors. The rock around me shifts, and I press my back to the wall behind me.

“Titania, you have to come now. We need to get the anchors to the Keeper before they are lost forever. The cave is going to be buried.” Foster tugs at my arm.

“I will be the last.” I slide the pack from my back, hand it to him, and then push him into the wave of flying soldiers.

One stops in front of me. “Titania, you must come.”

“I will see the last of the army out safely.”

“No, you will come now. The fae of this kingdom need you.” He grabs my hand and drags me into the sea of flying fae.

We weave through the tunnels, rubble pelting our bodies. I dodge falling rocks and shifting walls. Landing outside, I wait on the ledge for our last warrior, instructing the soldiers to rendezvous in the valley. Some carry injured or limp bodies, and I steel my emotions against the tears threatening to form. *How many will we lose?*

In the dark meadow below, we light torches and take count, finding all soldiers but two—whose comrades report the kobold overtook the men. Of those gathered, seven no longer draw breath, and fifteen are injured such that they cannot fly on their own. *Nine dead*, I summarize in my head, pushing away the thought that my father could make ten.

I approach General Kane. “How many troops did you bring?”

“Three hundred, Highness.”

“We lost many tonight.”

“It would have been much worse if not for your fast thinking and archery skills. You saved our kingdom, maybe even our realm.”

“Let us hope the anchors to the Faerie Ring are with the crystals we found.”

I instruct the fae to make stretchers of branches, and when these are finished, we take to the sky. Seeing the first light of the sun glowing above the trees, I guess Foster delivered the anchors to the Keeper. I glance back at the mountain, and my breath catches in my throat. Kobold stream around the ledge.

“General.” I point back at the peak.

He sounds the alarm, ordering the injured to be returned to the castle and all others to follow us. We charge up the mountain, arrows and swords held ready. We pelt the kobold with arrows, and other troops meet them on the ground.

I yell to Kane, “If their numbers grow much more, we will not be able to hold them off. There must be some way to stop them from entering this realm.”

Realizing the kobold must be fleeing because the mountain is unstable, I wonder if there is a way to collapse the opening. I fly above the cave entrance and see there is just enough room for one kobold to exit at a time. Lava seeps from several fissures beside the passage.

I gather ten of our biggest soldiers, and we cut down five trees. Stripping the branches, we

form battering rams and carry them to the peak. The warriors ram them against the side of the mountain. Each blow causes rock to fall over the entrance until it is sealed. We join the forces below, making sure every kobold is brought down.

The mountain trembles, and the top explodes with gushing lava. Racing away, I round up the soldiers on the other side of the meadow under cover of the trees. Kane instructs a small battalion to keep watch, and the rest of us take flight, bound for the castle.

Even from a distance, I can see the sun shining off the white stone of the structure. Drawing near, I descend to the meadow beside my home. Funeral pyres line the space, and I steel my emotions against my impending loss. One of these may be my father. I stop at each, picking flowers and laying them atop the fallen fae. My chest tightens as I reach the last body. Realizing it is not my father, my guilt matches my elation, for this fae is most likely *someone's* father.

Your brothers' pyres were set up in the courtyard. My brain tries to block the memory. Exiting the meadow, I walk through the orchard and into the garden. Each fae I pass drops to one knee as I approach. Even though I fight them, tears stain my cheeks. *My father is dead, and I am Queen.*

I arrive at the edge of the courtyard, but it is empty save soldiers milling about. Dropping to a knee, they clear a path for me. Tears cloud my vision. *There has not been enough time to prepare his body. You must be strong, Titania. Every fae watches you.* Knowing I must now bear the torch for my family, for my kingdom, I square my shoulders and raise my chin.

As I near the entrance, I see a red-headed soldier approaching. I blink, and Foster's face becomes clear. He drops to one knee in front of me.

“Stand up. You deserve as much honor as I.”

As he rises, he takes my hand and kisses it. “I am so glad to see you safe, Highness.”

My face flushes as his eyes lock on mine. His wide-eyed stare does little to give me hope, and I ball my hands into fists. *You cannot be a girl with a faint heart anymore. You must show strength and courage.* “Where is my father?”

“He is in the hall. He asks that you be presented at once.”

“He is alive? But I thought...” Relief washing over me, I release my breath. I skim the faces of those gathered. Their stares trained on me, I am bewildered as to why the soldiers have taken a knee. “I do not understand.”

Foster's eyes stay fixed on my face.

“What are you staring at?”

“Sorry, Highness. It is your face.”

Cheeks flaming anew, I wipe my cheeks. With the tears and dirt, I must look horrid.

Fingers pull at my wrists, and Foster’s hands wrap around mine. “Do not hide.”

I take in his emerald eyes and full, red lips, inches from mine. “Hide what?”

He traces a line across my cheek. “Your markings. They grew darker.”

“Highness.” I recognize Kane’s voice. “Your father waits for you in the grand hall.”

Father. Following Kane, I cross the corridor into the great hall. Father sits at the far end in a wheeled chair to the left of the King’s throne. Bandages wrap his torso, but he retains good color. It takes every bit of self-control to walk across the room instead of racing to his side and flinging my arms around his neck. I remember who and where I am and nod as each of those lining the walls bow to me.

“Father.” I curtsey. “I am glad to see you are well.”

“The doctors say I have a collapsed lung and two broken ribs, but they will heal.”

“That is good.”

“You have a report for me?”

“General Kane?” I spin to face him.

Kane smiles. “I believe you can give the King the information he needs.”

Raising my chin, I look at Father. “As you can see”—I motion to the window—“the anchors have been returned to the Keeper. They were hidden deep inside Mt. Kosciuszko at the southern side of our kingdom. We killed all those that escaped, sealed the rest inside the mountain, and left twenty soldiers to ensure there are no stray kobold roaming about.”

Father pushes on the arms of his chair, hoisting himself to a standing position “And you and Foster left the castle to find the kobold all by yourselves?”

“Yes, but it was my idea. Foster was only obeying my orders. If you need to blame someone for disobeying you, it is I.”

A smile spreads across his face. “I underestimated you. Even at your young age, you have proven yourself more than worthy of the throne I now relinquish.”

“Relinquish your throne? But why? You are still fit to rule. The doctor said you would heal.”

“I am an old man. Perhaps you do not see that. But you have shown me that you could save

this kingdom when I, or any of my generals or advisors, could not. You should be ruling Aubren as Queen.”

“All hail Queen Titania!” General Kane drops to one knee.

Shouts ring out through the hall, and those gathered in the courtyard crowd into the throne room. The voices deafen me, and my head swims. *Is this real? Surely I am dreaming. Am I prepared for this?* Father draws his sword, and I focus on the bright blade. *This is your destiny. You will be worthy of this post.* I bow before him.

“I hereby relinquish the rule of Aubren to my daughter, Titania, the only heir to the throne. Long live Queen Titania.”

“Long live Queen Titania,” the crowd echoes.

My heart thumps in my chest as I rise. I take Father’s hand as he leads me up to his throne, my throne. I sit down on the weathered, soft wood and run my hands down the arms, barely breathing. Raising my chin, I scan the crowd.

“We are victorious today because of the bravery of many, including Foster”—I raise my hand and motion to him—“our generals, and all the soldiers who fought bravely in service to this kingdom. Let us honor those lost in this battle.”

I lead the others outside to the meadow. Families gather around each pyre, and in turn, General Kane, Father, and I greet each and offer our condolences and thanks for their loved one’s service. Upon seeing the first pyre set ablaze, memories of my brothers flood my mind. I picture their faces and say a prayer, vowing to do everything in my power to spare others these fates.

We watch until the last pyre burns to embers and proceed back to the castle. Servers have brought wine and food, and I declare we honor the soldiers and celebrate our victory with an evening feast, music, and dancing.

Father places his hand atop mine. “Well done, daughter.”

I bend down and wrap my arms around him. Tears fill my eyes. “When they took a knee, I thought you were gone.”

“No one can keep a secret around here. You would do well to remember that.” He pats my back.

Releasing him, I spin to accept congratulations from all the generals, advisors, soldiers, and castle faeries. Sundown approaches as I greet the last of the well-wishers. I search the room for Foster, wondering where he may have gone.

“Princess—I am sorry—*Queen* Titania.” Alfreda lays her hand on my back. “Would you like to retire to your chambers to clean and dress for the celebration?”

Looking down at my leather pants and vest, I realize I am covered in dirt and blood. “If Mother were well, she would have a switch ready to whip me.”

Water pools in Alfreda’s eyes. “I wish she were here to witness this.”

“No tears.” Ignoring the tick in my side, I squeeze her shoulders. “Only food, music, and dancing tonight. I will check on Mother once I have cleaned up.”

I take the back passageways to my chambers and find Foster waiting at my door. “There you are. I was wondering where you went.”

“I am not much for crowds.”

“Well, I hope you are not opposed to being seated next to me at the feast.”

His face flushes red. “Of course not, Queen.”

I slap his arm. “Do not call me that. You and I make a good team. I hope we can be friends.”

“I thought we already were.”

“Well, of course, but you know what I mean.” My cheeks warm. “You do not have to call me queen, or bow, or anything.”

“I hope to be bowing in front of you for a long time.” He takes my hand, drops to one knee, and kisses my fingers.

My face flames anew. “I need to clean up and dress.”

“May I have a dance tonight?”

“Of course. At least, I think.” I bite my lip, trying to remember protocol for queens and dancing.

Foster rises. “I think there may be a line of eligible courtiers waiting to dance with you.”

“I am not of age to marry, so there will be no such thing. Tonight is about celebrating our victory.”

“As you say, my Queen.” He bows again.

My head spins with the weight of the word *Queen*. “Stop calling me that. And go! I have to dress.”

Jumping into the air, I enter my room and click the panels shut. I slump to the floor and press my back against the cool, soft wood. *How am I supposed to do this alone? Know who to*

dance with and how many dances? You have, Father, I remind myself. But I need my mother.

“Dearie”— Alfreda appears from my dressing chambers—“I have your bath ready. You must be exhausted.”

“I suppose I am.” I rise.

“I laid out a dress. Your father wanted you to join him in the study when you are ready.”

“Thank you.” I eye the light-green silk gown she laid out on my bed, complete with sash, white, elbow-length gloves, and an emerald necklace with a stone bigger than my thumb.

Crossing to the outfit, I lift the necklace. “Where did you get this?”

Alfreda wraps an arm around my shoulders. “It is your mother’s. She wore it the day your father was coronated. We thought she would want you to have it.”

“We?”

“Child.” Her eyes large, I recognize the look of her pity. I have seen it a thousand times. “Your father told her what happened, how you lead the army, defeated the kobold. He begged for her council, and still, she sat there, just staring at the fire like she always does. I do not think she is ever coming back to you. Your father wanted you to wear this.”

“I will not.” I shove it in her palm. “I will wear my own jewel.”

Scanning my room, I find my quiver and dump it. The one faerie cross I retrieved from the cave clinks across the stone floor. Retrieving it, I hold it up to her. “Have one of the jewelers set this. I have no clue which brother I found it with, but I will wear it in their memory. I slayed the kobold—not only for our kingdom, but for them.”

Alfreda holds my stare and lifts her finger to touch my cheek. “Your face is different.”

My face flames with heat. “Foster said my markings were darker.”

“I thought it was the dirt. But it is not.”

“What is happening to me?”

Her eyes drop. “We have never known a female ruler.”

My head swims. But I cannot think of that now. It is too much. “I should clean up. Have the jeweler set the stone.

“As you wish, madam.”

“Alfreda.”

“Yes?” She lifts her chin.

“Thank you for not calling me queen.”

“You will always be my Titania.”



Chapter

3

I WATCH HER WALK OUT AND close the door. Leaning over my dresser, I study my face in the mirror. Where slight red freckles graced the skin around my eyes, now rests solid green dots. Lines like tiger stripes flair our from my nose and eyes. I wipe the dust from my cheeks and touch the marks. The skin feels smooth and soft, just as before. My eyes land on my coat and pants, covered in blood. *How many kobold did I slay?* I would not have thought myself a killer. *But you knew you were.*

Turning from my reflection, I strip my muddy jacket and pants. I step into the tub and lower myself into the warm water. The smell of lavender surrounds me, calming my thoughts. The heat soothes my searing muscles, and I shut my eyes. *It is finished. We are safe.* I wash, clean my hair, and recline my neck on my soft wings.

“Madam.” A voice wakes me. “Alfreda sent us to help with your hair. She said you need something special.”

“Yes.” I stand, towel off, and slip into a robe.

I sit for an hour at my mirror while they dry then curl my mahogany locks, pinning them atop my head and weaving sprigs of ivy throughout. They admire their work, noting how the golden highlights match my eyes. I thank them and study my face. My markings, spots and dots on my cheeks and forehead and long, sweeping lines from my eyes, appear more prominent now that my face is clean. They bring out green highlights in my eyes I never noticed. *They make me look angry, perhaps scary to a small child,* I think. I soften them with light powder, brush rouge

of rose petals on my cheeks, and highlight my lashes with dark cream from coffee beans. For a finishing touch, I dust green powder, made from ground, dried beans, on my eyelids. Crossing to the plush green dress laying on my bed, I slide in one foot then the other and pull the garment over my hips. It is nothing like I have worn before, and I run my hand down the soft velvet. It clings to my body like a second skin, the color bringing out the soft greens in my wings.

Staring at my reflection, I wonder what Mother would say to me now, if she thinks of me at all, or whether there are any sentiments left within her. I turn from the mirror and slide my legs in the suede leather boots, lacing them up over my knees. *A queen should never be without protection.* I fit my short blade from the top drawer of my dresser between the soft leather and my calf.

A knock on the door startles me, and Alfreda pokes her head inside. “Are you ready, madam?”

“Madam? Seriously, Alfreda, just yesterday you were calling me dear, and darling, and child. And since when have you knocked to enter my chambers?”

“You look stunning.”

“Thank you.”

“But this morning I came to find you gone”—her hands tremble and tears form in her eyes—“and your father almost died. I feared I would never see you again. I can hardly fathom you fighting those, those hideous kobolds deep in the caves, and they are saying you led the charge.” Her shoulders shudder, she swallows, and she meets my gaze. “But now you are Queen. There are rules and protocols to be followed. Forgive me.”

I wrap my hands around hers and squeeze tightly. “No, Alfreda, forgive me. You will always be my friend. I betrayed you. I am sorry I left that way. But it is over, our kingdom is safe, we no longer need fear the kobold.”

She slides her hand from mine to wipe the tears from her face.

Squeezing her arm, I kiss her cheek. “I cannot have you crying. This is a celebration.”

“They are happy tears, Mad... Your father asked you to meet him in his study... Miss?”

She cocks one eyebrow up.

“I guess that will do.”

I choose the back passageways to wind to Father’s private quarters, and I find it feels odd to walk the halls on my feet. But my hair cannot be risked, and the breeze from flying would

surely loosen the pins. Clunking of my heels on the stone echoes through the tunnel. I enter the private study to find Father seated in a rolling chair in front of the fire, opposite Mother. Seeing the bandages on his face, him wince as he leans forward, and white streaks in his dark beard, my hearts skips at how close we came, *I came*, to losing him, the only real family I have left. My eyes cut to my mother's blank stare as I approach. *Does she register that the kobold will never threaten our realm again?* My mind ticks with worry. Of course, we cannot know that for certain. Hearing father cough, I refocus on him and a box on his lap.

I kneel at his side and grip his arm. "How are you feeling?"

"The doctors say I must remain still for a bit, a week or so is all, but I have not summoned you to talk about me." His lips form a smile. He lifts the box. "Stand, dear child."

Rising, I open the lid to find his crown resting on purple velvet. "Father, I cannot wear this."

"You can and you will. I have already had it altered. See"—he spins it around—"you cannot even tell where they soldered it. Kneel."

I rest one knee on the stone in front of him. He lowers the crown to my head. The metal headband sinks into my curls and rests on my skull, a perfect fit. I keep my eyes trained on his face, noting the wrinkles and ridges that are so familiar to me. *How many nights have we sat in this room, him reading, me playing, Mother staring at the fire?* I pray it will be many more. Father grips the hilt of his sword and raises his blade, touching my left shoulder, then my right.

Resting the weapon on his palms, he holds it out. "Rise, Queen Titania, and claim your birthright."

My mind spins but I obey. Taking the sword, I rise. As his youngest, we both know this was not my birthright. Also, our realm has never had a lone female ruler. Mind grappling with the enormity of my charge, I suck in a breath. *I have studied and trained three years for this moment. With his help, you can do this.* "I shall strive to make you proud, to wear this crown and wield this sword as you and your fathers before you have."

"I hope you will find your own new ways of ruling as well. You have shown in the past days that is much needed." He kisses my left cheek and then the right. "We will hold an official coronation once it can be planned. Now, it is time to celebrate the victory with your countrymen."

I force my worries away and flash a wide smile. "A joyous celebration it shall be now that

our Faerie Ring is restored, and we are safe from those creatures of the deep.”

Standing, I spin to face Mother and grasp her hand. “Mother, will you join us?”

“We will have Alfreda walk her to the celebration.” Father wraps his hand around mine and directs me to the door.

“I am not sure I know how to do this. There are so many things I would want to ask—who to dance with, how many dances. Foster said courtiers would be lining up to dance with me. And what of the advisors, and generals, an—”

Father chuckles. “Titania, let us leave the ‘morrow for the morning. Tonight, we are celebrating a victory. As for Foster, I would guess him to be one of your courtiers as well?”

My face flushes. “He may be, but I shall have none of that tonight. We shall only dance jigs.”

“I agree. Jigs it shall be.” Father wheels his chair backwards. “You will not be sixteen for a month, and I will not approve a marriage until at least seventeen. You only need to enjoy the celebration.”

I lean down to whisper in his ear as I open the door. “Alfreda said you talked to Mother.”

“I hoped, with justice for your brothers, the kobold defeated, you rising, she would say something. And to have you avenge them...” He shakes his head and looks back at her.

I plant a kiss on Father’s cheek. “I will speak with her.”

Watching him roll away, I straighten my back, cross to the hearth, kneel, and take her hands. “Mother, did Father tell you? We have defeated the kobold. Our realm is safe from them again, and it was me who led the charge. Father made me Queen.” Tears spring to my eyes, and I squeeze her fingers. “I need you. Please, come back to us.”

She blinks, and water pools in her eyes.

My heart soars at her show of emotion. I hug her to me, daring to hope she heals. “Everything is going to be fine. I promise.” Releasing my grip, I clasp her hands. “There is a celebration. Will you come? Sit beside me?”

Wriggling her fingers from mine, she touches my cheek. She opens her mouth, and I hold my breath, waiting for her to speak. But her lips press together. Lifting her hand from my face, she shakes her head. Her eyes cut to the fire, and the familiar glaze returns.

“This is but the beginning.” Her words are but a whisper above the crackle.

“The beginning of what?”

Mother's eyes cut to me and back to the flames.

"Never mind her." Father's voice startles me.

Standing, I spin to face him. "Those are the first words I have heard her utter in years, and she tells me this is the beginning."

"We will talk of this tomorrow. Everyone is waiting."

"Is there something you are not telling me?" I loom over him, and with my mind on alert, my wings rise.